Characters and Themes

Characters:

Odette and Mme Cottard

Note the description of Mme Cottard and the use that Odette makes of her in creating her salon. This recalls the scene on bus in *Swann’s Way* where she told Swann about Odette’s devotion to him.

As for Mme Cottard, my father was astonished that Mme Swann could see anything to be gained from inviting so utterly undistinguished a woman to her house, and said: “In spite of the Professor’s position, I must say that I cannot understand it.” Mamma, on the other hand, understood very well; she knew that a great deal of the pleasure which a woman finds in entering a class of society different from that in which she has previously lived would be lacking if she had no means of keeping her old associates informed of those others, relatively more brilliant, with whom she has replaced them. For this, she requires an eye-witness who may be allowed to penetrate this new, delicious world (as a buzzing, browsing insect bores its way into a flower) and will then, so it is hoped, as the course of her visits may carry her, spread abroad the tidings, the latent germ of envy and of wonder. Mme Cottard, who might have been created on purpose to fulfill this role, belonged to that special category in a visiting list which Mamma used to call the “Go tell the Spartans” people. —*Within a Budding Grove* 2: 120-21

Swann

We see that Swann’s jealousy over Odette has outlived his love, even his need for her:

And yet Swann had continued for some years to seek out old servants of hers, to such an extent had the painful curiosity persisted in him to know whether on that day, so
long ago, Odette had been in bed with Forcheville. Then that curiosity itself had disappeared, without, however, his abandoning his investigations. He went on trying to discover what no longer interested him, because his old self, though it had shriveled to extreme decrepitude, still acted mechanically, in accordance with preoccupations so utterly abandoned that Swann could not now succeed even in picturing to himself that anguish—so compelling once that he had been unable to imagine that he would ever be delivered from it, that only the death of the woman he loved (though death, as will be shown later on in this story by a cruel corroboration, in no way diminishes the sufferings caused by jealousy) seemed to him capable of smoothing the path of his life which then seemed impassably obstructed. —Within a Budding Grove 2: 132-33

Marcel

Here is an important hint about Marcel’s apprenticeship as a writer:

But Odette had been merely by his side, not (as the [little] phrase had been) within him, and so had seen nothing—nor would have, had she been a thousand time as comprehending—of that vision which for none of us (or at least I was long under the impression that this rule admitted of no exception) can be externalized. —Within a Budding Grove 2: 146

Themes:

The artist as mirror

This image of Bergotte as a car that takes to the skies combines a number of Proustian images that illustrate the artist’s experience in society and hint at the development of others to come. Genius, as represented by Bergotte, is the power to convert one’s experience into a mirror that reflects the truth and then as an aviator who looks down and visually encompasses the lives of others. Bergotte’s works were first identified as mirrors of truth (Swann’s Way 1: 96), and his example will be repeated toward the end of Marcel’s quest.

The artist as a mirror, reflector, or projector of light often leads into another metaphoric image for Proust’s artists, namely, that of planets. It is an ideal metaphoric
image for the novelist’s purposes, combining as it does the essential features of the Prustian artist: planets are integral worlds, giant reflectors of light orbiting the cosmos. Planetary imagery thus embodies two principal elements associated with the Proustian artist—light and flight—and also implies an absolute freedom and an integrated existence.

... more on Bergotte as car/airplane:

We have seen Proust’s comparison of the writer Bergotte to a car that gathers speed and takes flight. This is one of many vertical, transcendent analogies that we will encounter of the artist who soars into the sky. The first airplanes did in fact resemble automobiles and the pilots were sometimes referred to as “drivers.” The planes had to “taxi” across a field to gain enough speed to rise vertically. The distinguished French photographer Jacques-Henri Lartigue offers excellent descriptions of the first “cars” that became airborne. See his Mémoires sans mémoire, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1975. Here’s one of his brief descriptions: “l’aéroplane roule tout seul... comme une drôle d’automobile déguisée en cabane” 70-71.

In a poem entitled “A mon Pégase,” written in 1905, the Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti made his own panegyric to an automobile that roars across the countryside before taking flight. This was one of Marinetti’s most popular poems and he was often asked to recite it. The line that describes the moment when lift-off is achieved reads: “Hurrah! Plus de contact avec la terre immonde!” (Hurray! No more contact with the filthy earth!” See Pär Bergman, “Modernolatria” et “Simultaneità”: Recherches sur deux tendances dans l’avant-garde littéraire en Italie et en France à la veille de la première guerre mondiale, Studia Litterarum Upsaliensia 2 (Bonniens: Svenska Bokförlaget, 1965), 44.

Bergotte as representative of the “Eternal Mind” or universal soul

In drafts for the novel, we find notes developing the idea that the individual is an ephemeral manifestation of eternal laws. In a variation on the theme, Proust wrote: “A single poet who has endured since the beginning of the world and so unique that even his physical portraits seem under the name of Baudelaire, Hugo, Vigny to be only the
different profiles of the same admirable face. The works themselves could be framed
together like the scattered pieces of the same universe.” Matinée de la princesse de
Guermantes, 366. Proust had expressed the idea of a universal soul many years earlier in
his essay “Contre l’obscurité “ (Against Obscurity), published in La Revue blanche on
July 15, 1896: It is “another law of life” that the “universal or eternal” can be realized
“only in individuals. In works of literature as in life, human beings, however general they
may be, must be strongly individualized (cf. War and Peace, The Mill on the Floss) and it
can be said of them, as of each one of us, that it is when they are most themselves that
they realize most fully the universal soul.” “Against Obscurity,” Sturrock, 139. Stéphane
Zagdanski has come to the realization indirectly through Jorge Luis Borges’s remark that
“Dante and Ulysses are one and the same man.” This applies just as well, he adds, to

The unknowable other

. . regret, like desire, seeks not to analyze but to gratify itself. When one begins to love,
one spends one’s time, not in getting to know what one’s love really is, but in arranging
for tomorrow’s rendez-vous. When one renounces love one seeks not to know one’s grief
but to offer the person who is its cause the expression of it which seems most moving.
One says the things which one feels the need to say, and which the other will not
understand: one speaks for oneself alone. —Within A Budding Grove 2: 259